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**【研究論文】**

# Literature Review of Japan's Running Boom

## 日本におけるランニングブームに関する文献レビュー

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### Abstract

The impact of the Tokyo Marathon on Japan's recreational running scene has been considerable. In the years immediately following the 2007 inauguration of the marathon, the number of adult runners increased by hundreds of thousands. Significant growth in the number and types of running races was seen as well, particularly those, like the Tokyo Marathon, hosted by large metropolitan areas and catering to as many as 30,000 runners, as the economic benefits reaped by the hosts justified the operating costs. Naturally, more and more municipalities hoped to cash in on the country's running boom. And just as unsurprisingly, some runners, having arrived as newcomers to the sport during the boom's early days, began to fall off the back of the race, hang up their shoes, and move on to the next thing. While the boom has yet to go bust, organizers of smaller runs have struggled to attract participants, with a few forced to cancel events altogether. This literature review will discuss the reasons for running's decline in Japan and present a sustainable model for medium-sized events, one based on a footrace in Niigata the author has twice completed.

### Literature Review

#### Is Recreational Running in Japan at a Crossroads?

Japan's premiere running event, the Tokyo Marathon, was held in 2007 for the first time. Combining two earlier races, the marathon, which also includes a 10 kilometer category, was an immediate success for both the organizers and the Japanese capital. According to the marathon's official site, 95,044 runners applied for one of the inaugural event's 30,870 openings on offer by lottery. Such was the interest generated by the marathon that just two years later that number grew to almost 262,000. By 2017 the bairitsu, or oversubscription rate (OR), had reached 12.2, an all-time high. The marathon's impact on the Tokyo economy has been equally impressive, with the total economic contribution estimated to have been in excess of 2 billion yen annually during

its early years. Figures for 2016 show that in its tenth year, the Tokyo Marathon contributed just over 3 billion yen to the capital's economy.

During the years immediately following Tokyo 2007, municipalities of all sizes throughout Japan added new running events to their calendars as the number of recreational runners in the country increased. Among the nation's largest cities, Osaka, Kobe, Fukuoka, Kyoto, Nagoya, and Yokohama have all established new marathons since 2007, with the smaller cities of Himeji, Nara, Kita-Kyushu, Kumamoto, and Kanazawa following suit as well. Moreover, in Niigata, the prefecture in which I reside, 15 of 48 running events scheduled to take place at the village, town, or city level in 2017 were established after 2007, according to my own survey of the online site runnersbible. Thus, the starter's pistol at the inaugural Tokyo Marathon did more than simply signal the opening of Japan's most popular running event: it also triggered a running boom throughout the country.

However, by 2012, just five years after the first Tokyo Marathon, the increase in the number of Japanese adults jogging or taking part in organized running events at least once a year had peaked, as Sasagawa Sports Foundation has reported. Figures published by the foundation in even-numbered years since 1998 indicate that prior to Tokyo, participation in running followed ups and downs in four-year cycles. In other words, during the four-year period 1998-2002 (the earliest for which Sasagawa has data), Japan's running population grew from 1998 to the start of the new millennium but fell thereafter, followed by a rebound from 2002-2004 and yet another decline during the years 2005-2006. From the latter year, by contrast, the number of adult runners showed 6 years of steady growth, up from 5.9% of the total adult population in 2006 to 7.9% in 2008 (the year following Tokyo), to 9.7% in 2012, when the running population peaked above 10 million. Sasagawa's estimates have shown the number of runners dipping to 9.86 million by 2014 and falling further since that year to 8.93 million in 2016. Based on this data, it seems fair to conclude the boom has run its course.

## **Factors in the Decline of Japan's Running Population**

### **Event Registration and the Oversubscription Rate**

What caused the drop in Japan's running population? Kin (2014) has attributed the decline to a number of factors. Topping the list is the oversubscription of popular events. As earlier noted, the 2017 Tokyo Marathon was oversubscribed at a rate of 12.2, with 321,459 applicants in the lottery, over 295,000 of whom were destined not to be lined up at the start on race day, representing an OR four times greater than in 2007. The Osaka Marathon and the Kobe Marathon, both established in 2011, had an OR between 4.2 and 5.5 and 3.7 and 4.5, respectively, in their first six years. The Yokohama Marathon's reserved slots for residents of Kanagawa

prefecture were oversubscribed at the rate of 11.5 in 2015, the first year for the event. Thus, the lottery entry system adopted by some organizers results in hundreds of thousands of disappointed runners receiving rejection notices every year, among them some with years of unsuccessful attempts to register for a particular race.

With the OR of major events so high, many runners have adopted a “first, the important thing is to win the lottery” approach to registration. In practice this means that prospective participants subscribe to multiple events (thereby sending the OR even higher) to improve their odds of getting into at least one, even if, at the time of entering the lottery, these runners are either ill-prepared for the event or have failed to consider what preparation they would require to run what for some would be their first distance race. Consequently, some winners of the lottery complete registration only to discover later that their primary motivation was to win rather than to train for or to participate in the event itself.

Moreover, the “first come, first served” entry system favored by other race organizers is hardly an improvement over the foregoing, as events sometimes “sell out” in half an hour or less. As a result, the speed with which this occurs becomes an index of the race's popularity, creating a positive feedback loop as year on year more runners attempt to gain entry to events that fill up in record time. Writing in the weekly magazine *Number*, Kin (2014) has suggested that one of the challenges facing organizers is the loss of motivation (or what I call “entry fatigue”) that would-be participants experience year after year as their attempts to register for the most popular events are repeatedly frustrated.

### **The Surprising Cost of Participation: A Running Total**

Another reason for running's decline after 2012 is the expense runners may incur to participate in some of the country's largest marathons, where the entry fee can reach 10,000 yen, the cost (excluding tax) of a full-marathon entry at Tokyo. Some go even higher: in 2015, participants had to pay 15,000 yen (plus an additional 1,000 yen in processing fees) to run the inaugural Yokohama Marathon. Furthermore, race organizers may require runners to collect registration packets the eve of the event, saddling participants with the extra cost of an overnight stay. Sakai (2015) has concluded that some runners, initially attracted to the sport by its perceived affordability, become disillusioned after discovering that taking part in organized events can involve considerable outlay, a realization contributing to the current decline of Japan's running population.

### **The Recreational Runner and the Role Model**

Additionally, Sakai (2015) has noted that as the majority of runners are recreational, the

sport faces an uphill battle to gain long-term devotees anyway, one made longer and steeper, it is argued, in the absence of a Japanese marathon champion at the elite level internationally. Indeed, since Mizuki Noguchi struck Olympic gold at Athens in 2004, no Japanese woman has medaled in a distance event at the Games. Moreover, no Japanese female has come close to matching Noguchi's winning time of 2:19:12 at the 2005 Berlin Marathon, then a world record and still 11th on the all-time list: Yuka Ando, second-place finisher at the 2017 Nagoya Women's Marathon in 2:21:36, is the fastest Japanese woman since.

As with the women, men's marathon running appears to be moving backwards in Japan: in the decade and a half since Toshinori Takaoka's 2002 men's record of 2:06:16, then the 11th fastest time in history, Atsushi Sato's 2:07:13 at the 2007 Fukuoka International came closest to standard. And while marathoner and Saitama prefectural civil servant Yuki Kawauchi is a crowd favorite, his personal best 2:08:14 at Seoul in 2013 is not even in the top 800 all-time.

### Event Saturation

Clearly, the pace has slowed. Mega-events will continue to attract in excess of capacity, it seems, while some smaller events may be more vulnerable to the decline in the running population. Weekly news magazine Bankisha (2017) has charted the steady increase in the number of events from 873 in 2007 to 2,456 in the year 2016, a trend defying the drop in runners beginning in 2012 and further saturating a market characterized by overcapacity.

### Rest in Peace: Retired or Endangered Events

One of the victims is the Tanegashima Rocket Marathon. Established in 1987, the event will fold after 2017, as Bankisha (2017) has reported. The reason? A new footrace introduced by Kagoshima City has seen the older run lose over a third of its participants. The Omachi Alps Marathon in Nagano is likewise in danger of cancellation, as neighboring Matsumoto City's recently- introduced full marathon offers runners views of the city's famous castle. Despite offering stunning views of its own of the snowclad Japan Alps along its route, the Omachi marathon experienced a drop in participants from 2,176 in 2013 to just 876 the following year. Adding to Omachi's woes are events established in nearby Toyama and Ishikawa in conjunction with the opening of the Hokuriku Super Express rail line. Closer to home, my search of Niigata race listings on the internet site *runnersbible* has revealed that from 2015-16, when the running population was falling by over a million nationwide, 9 races in the prefecture were discontinued, among them the Hisui Marathon in Itoigawa City, held for the 23rd and final time in 2015. Nevertheless, new races continue to be added to the calendar: late in 2016 Niigata City opened registration for its inaugural Niigata City Half Marathon, scheduled for March, 2017.

## Discussion and Conclusion: A Sustainable Model

In my view, Gosen City, Niigata, hosts a running event likely to remain successful even during a prolonged slump in the running population and one that could serve as a model to other communities: the Gosen Koyo Marason, or Gosen Fall Foliage Marathon. The city, with a population 51,519 and a location in the center of the prefecture, southeast of Niigata City, established the marathon in 2009, holding it in early November, a time of year when there is little competition from similar events. Since its inception the race has grown steadily, from 872 runners its first year to 2,253 participants in 2016. According to the commemorative yearbook published for the 2017 edition of the race, there were 3,513 registrants, the largest field ever.

I have noted several factors contributing to its appeal. Among them is the event's seasonal theme, autumn foliage, with runners able to view fall color along the route. Another is the variety of distances on offer, from 3 kilometers (including a walk), to the 10k and half marathon; the 2017 edition included a full marathon category as well. A further reason for the race's popularity is the cosplay category, with prizes on offer for participants with the most original or elaborate costumes. As noted earlier, runners may be turned off by events whose registration fees are perceived to be excessively steep; Gosen seems reasonable at 4,700 yen for the half and 5,800 yen for the full marathon in 2017 (By contrast, the entry fee for the 2017 Niigata City full marathon was 9,700 yen). Moreover, numerous booths near the start/finish line at Gosen Athletics Track offer local foods and souvenirs and contribute to the fun, festival atmosphere, one that is further enhanced by comedic videos (with English subtitles) produced by the organizers and uploaded to the internet. Finally, community involvement and support are essential to the success of events like Gosen's: local residents cheering runners along the course, which sometimes passes through sparsely populated areas, provide runners valuable encouragement; additionally, as running events can result in disruptions to people's routines, particularly through temporary traffic regulations, the patience and understanding of those affected is required. The souvenir yearbook for 2016 lists 800 volunteers of all ages and backgrounds, demonstrating strong community backing for the event.

The current drop in the adult running population will likely level out, as in the past, to be followed by an increase. Nevertheless, the type of event organized by Gosen City could serve as a model for small and mid-sized municipalities: a race with a clear identity and theme, reasonable entry fees, and the commitment of local groups to its success. Such an event is likely to thrive even during periodic contractions in the running population and regardless of whether Tokyo 2020 produces a national champion capable of inspiring the next generation of recreational runner.

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